

Dover Beach
by: Matthew Arnold

The sea is calm tonight,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!

Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Agean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Stanza 1

moon . . . straits: The water reflects the image of the moon. A strait is a narrow body of water that connects two larger bodies of water. In this poem, *straits* refers to the Strait of Dover (French: *Pas de Calais*), which connects the English Channel on the south to the North Sea on the north. The distance between the port cities of Dover, England, and Calais, France, is about twenty-one miles via the Strait of Dover.
light . . . gone: This clause establishes a sense of rhythm in that the light blinks on and off. In addition, the clause foreshadows the message of later lines--that the light of faith in God and religion, once strong, now flickers. Whether an observer at Dover can actually see a light at Calais depends on the height of the lighthouse and the altitude at which the observer sees the light (because of the curvature of the earth), on the brightness of the light, and on the weather conditions.

cliffs . . . vast: These are white cliffs, composed of chalk, a limestone that easily erodes. Like the light from France, they glimmer, further developing the theme of a weakening of the light of faith. The fact that they easily erode supports this theme.

moon-blanching: whitened by the light of the moon.

grating . . . pebbles: Here, *grating* (meaning *rasping*, *grinding*, or *scraping*) introduces conflict between the sea and the land and, symbolically, between long-held religious beliefs and the challenges against them. However, it may be an exaggeration that that pebbles cause a *grating roar*.

strand: shoreline

Stanza 2

Sophocles . . . Aegean: Arnold alludes here to a passage in the ancient Greek play *Antigone*, by Sophocles, in which Sophocles says the gods can visit ruin on people from one generation to the next, like a swelling tide driven by winds.

it: "the eternal note of sadness" (line 14).

Aegean: The sea between Greece and Turkey. In the time of Sophocles, the land occupied by Turkey was known as Anatolia.

turbid: muddy, cloudy

Find . . . thought: In the sound of the sea, the poet "hears" a thought that disturbs him as did the one heard by Sophocles.

Stanza 3

Sea . . . full: See theme, above, for an explanation.

girdle: sash, belt; anything that surrounds or encircles

I only hear: I alone hear

shingles: gravel on the beach

Interpretation

There was a time when faith in God was strong and comforting. This faith wrapped itself around us, protecting us from doubt and despair, as the sea wraps itself around the continents and islands of the world. Now, however, the sea of faith has become a sea of doubt. Science challenges the precepts of theology and religion; human misery makes people feel abandoned, lonely. People place their faith in material things.

Stanza 4

neither . . . pain: The world has become a selfish, cynical, amoral, materialistic battlefield; there is much hatred and pain, but there is no guiding light.

darkling: dark, obscure, dim; occurring in darkness; menacing, threatening, dangerous, ominous.

Where . . . night: E.K. Brown and J.O. Bailey suggest that this line is an allusion to Greek historian Thucydides' account of the Battle of Epipolae (413 BC), a walled fortress near the city of Syracuse on the island of Sicily. In that battle, Athenians fought an army of Syracusans at night. In the darkness, the combatants lashed out blindly at one another. Brown and Bailey further observe that the line "suggests the confusion of mid-Victorian values of all kinds . . .

Interpretation

Let us at least be true to each other in our marriage, in our moral standards, in the way we think; for the world will not be true to us. Although it presents itself to us as a dreamland, it is a sham. It offers nothing to ease our journey through life.

Figures of Speech

Arnold uses a variety of figures of speech, including the following examples. (For definitions of the different figures of speech, see the glossary of literary terms:

- Alliteration Examples 1: to-night , tide; full, fair (Lines 1-2); gleams, gone; coast, cliff; long line; which the waves; folds, furled
- Assonance: tide, lies;
- Paradox and Hyperbole: *grating roar of pebbles*
- Metaphor: *which the waves draw back, and fling* (comparison of the waves to an intelligent entity that rejects that which it has captured)
- Metaphor: *turbid ebb and flow of human misery* (comparison of human misery to the ebb and flow of the sea)
- Metaphor: *The Sea of Faith* (comparison of faith to water making up an ocean)
- Simile: *The Sea of Faith . . . lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled* (use of like to compare the sea to a girdle)
- Metaphor: *breath of the night-wind* (comparison of the wind to a living thing)
- Simile: *the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams* (use of like to compare the world to a land of dreams)
- Anaphora: So various, so beautiful, so new (repetition of so)
- Anaphora: nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain (repetition of *nor*)

Matthew Arnold's best-known poem, "Dover Beach" is a masterpiece of mood, both a love poem and an elegy.

The sea is used as both an image and a metaphor. The first stanza has the narrator of the poem inviting his lover to look at the sea through the window with him. It is a peaceful moment: "Come to the window, sweet is the night air". However, nothing is as solid as it appears, and the imagery soon becomes that of an eroding shore-line and light that "gleams and is gone". This erosion is also reflected in the poem's form, which is a series of incomplete sonnets. "Dover Beach" then is technically neither free verse nor strictly formal verse.

The waves of the sea remind the poem's narrator that Sophocles also wrote about the sea and the misery of his civilization. This leads to the narrator's own melancholy and thoughts of faithlessness that intrude when he is with his lover. The sea then becomes the Sea of Faith, a symbol for a time when religion could still be experienced without the doubts brought about by progress and science. By the middle decade of the C19th British confidence had reached its highest point. Commanding a great empire, the home of Science and Industry, and the producer of great literature, many of the inhabitants believed they populated the greatest nation of the earth. Yet by the 1860s this great confidence had begun to wane. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, while not universally acclaimed, had shaken the belief in a benevolent deity as the creator of all. Even for those who attempted to combine religion with an acceptance of evolution, the new theory still posed the difficulty that man seemed no longer the pinnacle of creation. This crisis of confidence and the depression that seeped into British intellectual life is found emerging in Arnold's poem.

The third stanza is particularly elegiac, with the imagery of the receding tide: "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" that is linked to the loss of certainty, and manifests in the narrator with a plea for truth from his lover. The sadness in the poem intensifies as the poem reaches its conclusion. There is a sense of the narrator being caught between the letting go of a set of beliefs before they have been replaced by another.

It is a poem of religious doubt, and a classic text of Victorian anxiety over lost faith. "Dover Beach" was written after Tennyson's own epic of Victorian doubt, *In Memoriam*, and is also typical of Victorian modes of writing in that it shifts seamlessly from the realistic to the symbolic. "Dover Beach" is also representative of Arnold's frustrated desire to find an authentic and authoritative language. He is strongly influenced by Wordsworth.